

From Representation to Reception: Student Perceptions of Own-Voice Narratives in the Kerala Higher Secondary English Curriculum

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Abstract: *The inclusion of diverse literary voices in school curricula is essential for enabling learners to engage with literature as a reflection of varied social, cultural, and lived experiences. A critical examination of the Kerala Higher Secondary English curriculum has revealed the limited representation of marginalised and own-voice narratives, particularly those emerging from Dalit, Adivasi, feminist, regional, and other historically underrepresented communities. While existing curriculum-based studies have identified these representational gaps, limited attention has been given to how students themselves perceive the diversity of prescribed texts and the absence of narratives that reflect their own social and cultural realities. The present study, therefore, shifts the focus from representation to reception by exploring Higher Secondary students' perceptions of own-voice narratives in the Kerala English curriculum. It seeks to examine students' awareness of own-voice narratives, their perceptions of literary diversity, their sense of identification with prescribed texts, and their attitudes towards the inclusion of narratives rooted in lived experiences of caste, gender, class, region, and marginalisation. The study also investigates students' perceptions of the potential of such narratives to foster empathy, critical thinking, identity awareness, and social consciousness. Adopting a student-centred empirical approach, the study proposes to gather learners' responses through a structured questionnaire and analyse their perceptions of representation and curricular inclusion. By foregrounding student reception, the study aims to extend existing textual analyses of the Kerala Higher Secondary English curriculum and contribute to broader discussions on inclusive literary education, curriculum diversification, and the pedagogical significance of own-voice narratives. The study ultimately argues for a movement beyond tokenistic representation towards a more pluralistic curriculum that enables learners to encounter, recognise, and critically engage with diverse lived experiences.*

Keywords: Own-Voice Narratives, Student Perceptions, Literary Diversity, Kerala Higher Secondary Curriculum, Marginalised Voices, Lived Experience, Inclusive Education, Curriculum Reform

I. INTRODUCTION

Literary education occupies an important position in the development of students' linguistic abilities, critical consciousness, emotional sensitivity, and understanding of society. In a culturally and socially heterogeneous context such as Kerala, the English classroom has the potential to function not merely as a space for language acquisition and appreciation of literary form, but also as a site where learners encounter diverse identities, histories, experiences, and perspectives. Literature can enable students to recognise experiences beyond their immediate social contexts while simultaneously providing opportunities to see aspects of their own lives represented in the texts they study. Consequently, the selection of literary texts in a school curriculum is significant because curricular choices determine



not only what students read but also whose experiences are made visible, whose voices are heard, and whose perspectives become part of the process of knowledge formation.

The Kerala Higher Secondary English curriculum for Plus One and Plus Two has previously been examined from the perspective of literary diversity and representation. A critical analysis of the curriculum identified a relatively limited presence of regional, marginalised, and first-person experiential narratives, alongside a stronger emphasis on canonical Euro-American and mainstream nationalist voices. In particular, Dalit, Adivasi, feminist, regional, and other narratives rooted in lived experience were found to occupy a marginal position within the prescribed literary corpus. The earlier study argued that such representational limitations can restrict students' exposure to the complexity of identity, oppression, resistance, and social experience. It consequently advocated a curricular movement towards greater inclusion of "own-voice" narratives—texts that articulate experiences from within particular social, cultural, caste, gender, class, or regional locations.

The concept of own-voice narratives is particularly significant in this context because it foregrounds the relationship between literary representation and lived experience. Narratives emerging from marginalised communities can provide perspectives that may not be adequately conveyed through representations produced from outside those communities. Within an educational context, such narratives can challenge dominant literary frameworks and encourage students to engage with questions of identity, power, inequality, resistance, and belonging. The earlier curriculum analysis emphasised that the absence of such voices can produce a relatively homogenised literary exposure and limit opportunities for students to understand the diverse realities that characterise contemporary Indian society.

However, identifying representational gaps in curricular texts constitutes only one dimension of the problem. A significant question that remains insufficiently explored concerns the reception of these curricular choices by students themselves. Although the existing analysis establishes the limited presence of marginalised and own-voice narratives, it does not empirically examine how learners perceive this limitation, whether they recognise the diversity—or lack of diversity—within their prescribed texts, or whether they experience a sense of identification with the literary voices presented to them. The pedagogical significance of curricular representation ultimately depends not only on what texts are selected but also on how learners encounter, interpret, respond to, and relate to those texts. The earlier study itself highlights the importance of examining whether literary selections contribute to students' understanding of identity, empathy, and social awareness. This gap creates the need to shift the analytical focus from representation to reception. A student-centred investigation can provide insights that textual analysis alone cannot offer. Students may accept, question, resist, or reinterpret the representations provided by the curriculum. Their responses can reveal whether the existing literary corpus enables them to recognise their own social and cultural realities, understand experiences different from their own, and develop sensitivity towards marginalised communities. Furthermore, students' perceptions can illuminate whether the inclusion of own-voice narratives is considered relevant to their educational experience and whether such narratives are perceived as capable of fostering empathy, critical thinking, identity awareness, and social consciousness. Such an approach therefore places the learner at the centre of discussions surrounding curriculum diversification.

II. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The Kerala Higher Secondary English curriculum plays an important role in shaping students' literary understanding, critical thinking, social awareness, and attitudes towards diverse identities and experiences. However, a critical examination of the curriculum has revealed the limited representation of marginalised and own-voice narratives, particularly those reflecting Dalit, Adivasi, feminist, regional, and other lived experiences, while canonical and mainstream voices receive greater prominence. Although existing analysis has identified these representational gaps, limited attention has been given to how students themselves perceive literary diversity, whether they find their social and cultural realities reflected in the prescribed texts, and how they respond to the inclusion or absence of own-voice narratives. Since students are active participants in the meaning-making process of literary education, their perceptions are essential for understanding the pedagogical significance of curricular representation. The present study therefore



addresses the gap between curricular representation and student reception by examining students' awareness of own-voice narratives, their perceptions of literary diversity and identification with prescribed texts, and their views on the potential of such narratives to foster empathy, identity awareness, critical thinking, and social consciousness. By shifting the focus from "whose voices are represented?" to "how do students receive and respond to these voices?", the study seeks to generate student-centred insights that can contribute to the development of a more inclusive, pluralistic, and learner-responsive Higher Secondary English curriculum in Kerala.

III. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

1. To examine Higher Secondary students' awareness and understanding of own-voice narratives representing diverse lived experiences of caste, gender, class, region, and marginalisation.
2. To analyse students' perceptions of literary diversity and representation in the prescribed Kerala Higher Secondary English curriculum.
3. To investigate the extent to which students identify with or relate to the social, cultural, and personal experiences represented in the prescribed literary texts.
4. To examine students' perceptions of the potential of own-voice narratives to develop empathy, critical thinking, identity awareness, and social consciousness.
5. To explore students' views on the inclusion of marginalised and own-voice narratives and suggest possibilities for developing a more inclusive, pluralistic, and learner-responsive English curriculum in Kerala.

IV. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. What is the level of awareness and understanding among Higher Secondary students regarding own-voice narratives representing diverse lived experiences?
2. How do Higher Secondary students perceive the representation of literary, social, cultural, and marginalised voices in the Kerala Higher Secondary English curriculum?
3. To what extent do students identify with or relate to the social, cultural, and personal experiences represented in the prescribed English texts?
4. How do students perceive the potential of own-voice narratives in developing empathy, critical thinking, identity awareness, and social consciousness?
5. What are students' views regarding the inclusion of marginalised and own-voice narratives, and what possibilities do they suggest for making the Kerala Higher Secondary English curriculum more inclusive and learner-responsive?

V. HYPOTHESES OF THE STUDY

Alternative Hypothesis (H_1):

There is a significant relationship between the inclusion of own-voice narratives in the Kerala Higher Secondary English curriculum and students' perceptions of literary diversity, identity awareness, empathy, critical thinking, and social consciousness.

Null Hypothesis (H_0):

There is no significant relationship between the inclusion of own-voice narratives in the Kerala Higher Secondary English curriculum and students' perceptions of literary diversity, identity awareness, empathy, critical thinking, and social consciousness.

VI. RELEVANCE OF THE STUDY

The present study is relevant because it shifts the focus from the representation of voices in the Kerala Higher Secondary English curriculum to students' reception of those voices. The earlier critical analysis identified the limited representation of Dalit, Adivasi, feminist, regional, and other own-voice narratives and highlighted the need for a more



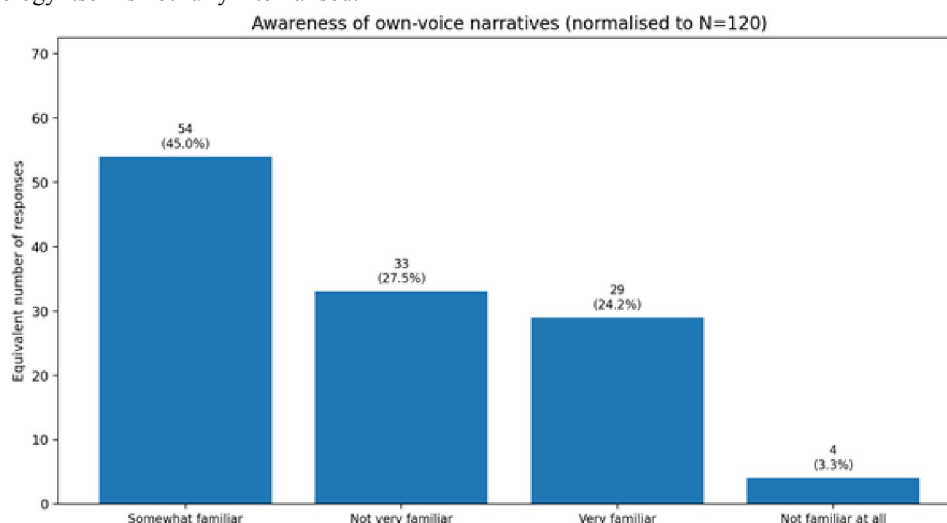
inclusive and pluralistic curriculum. However, understanding students' perceptions is essential for determining whether the existing literary selections enable learners to recognise diverse identities, relate literature to lived experiences, and develop empathy, critical thinking, and social awareness. By examining students' awareness, identification with prescribed texts, and attitudes towards the inclusion of own-voice narratives, the study provides an important learner-centred perspective that complements existing textual analyses. It is therefore significant for curriculum developers, teachers, and educational policymakers seeking to move beyond tokenistic representation towards a more inclusive, socially responsive, and learner-oriented English curriculum that reflects the heterogeneous realities of Kerala society.

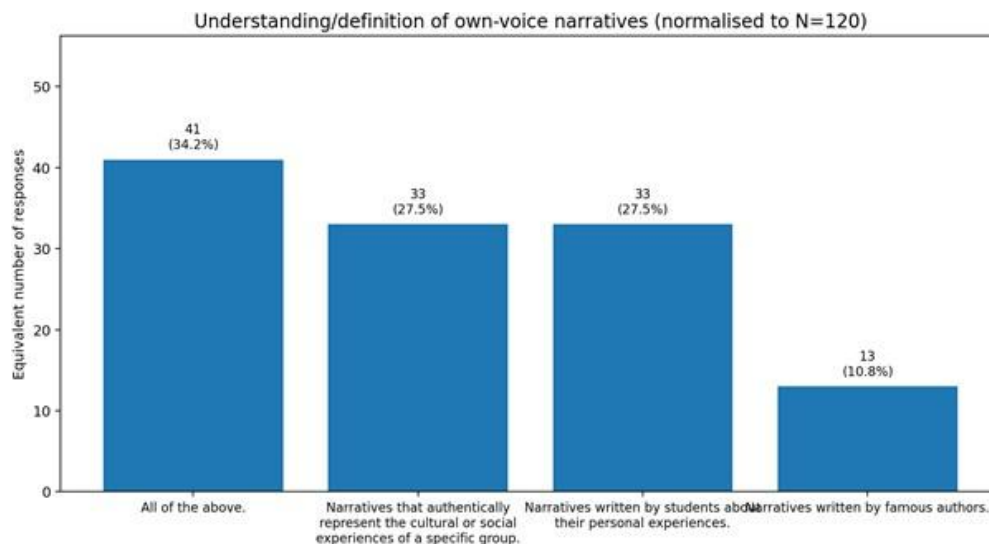
VII. CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF STUDENT RESPONSES

The present analysis examines the questionnaire responses to understand how students receive and evaluate own-voice narratives within the context of English literary education. Rather than merely presenting numerical frequencies, the analysis interprets the response patterns in relation to students' conceptual awareness, engagement with lived experience, perceptions of literary diversity, and views on the social and academic value of own-voice narratives. The graphs reveal an important tension: students' familiarity with the terminology is uneven, yet their responses to the educational possibilities of own-voice narratives are considerably more positive. The analysis therefore treats student reception as an important dimension of curricular inquiry and considers both the possibilities and limitations revealed by the data.

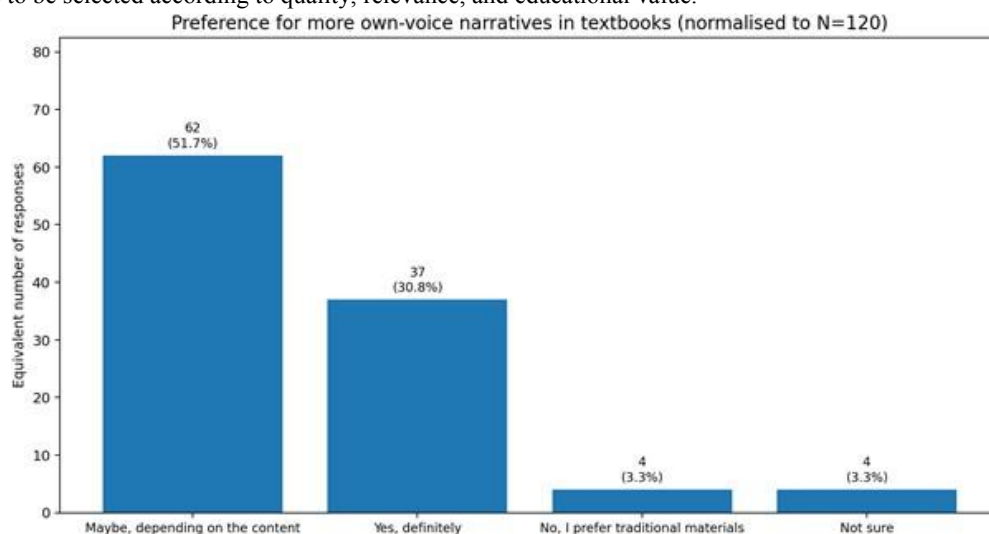
The first set of graphs reveals a significant distinction between familiarity with the terminology of own-voice narratives and a deeper understanding of the concept. The largest category in the familiarity graph is "Somewhat familiar," representing 54 of the equivalent 120 responses (45.0%), followed by "Not very familiar" at 33 (27.5%) and "Very familiar" at 29 (24.2%). Only 4 responses (3.3%) indicate that students are "Not familiar at all." This distribution suggests that the concept is not entirely unfamiliar to the respondents, yet strong conceptual familiarity has not been established. The predominance of partial familiarity indicates an emerging awareness rather than a consolidated conceptual framework.

The definition graph reinforces this interpretation. The largest response, "All of the above," accounts for 41 responses (34.2%), while 33 responses each (27.5%) identify authentic representation of a group's cultural or social experience and narratives written by students about their own experiences. A further 13 responses (10.8%) associate the term with narratives written by famous authors. The relatively dispersed distribution suggests that students understand own-voice narratives through several overlapping ideas—authenticity, personal experience, and representation—but do not necessarily distinguish these concepts theoretically. This demonstrates that student receptiveness can exist even when the terminology itself is not fully internalised.



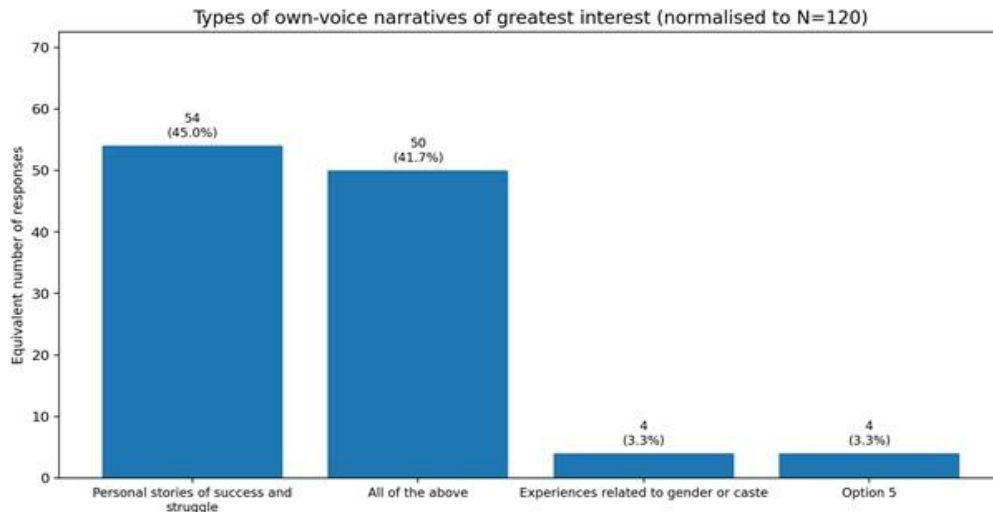


The graphs concerning curricular inclusion indicate a generally receptive but discerning student response. The largest category in the textbook-inclusion graph is “Maybe, depending on the content,” with 62 of the equivalent 120 responses (51.7%), while 37 responses (30.8%) favour inclusion “definitely.” Only 4 responses (3.3%) prefer traditional materials and another 4 (3.3%) are unsure. The dominance of the conditional response is particularly significant. It suggests that students are not demanding indiscriminate replacement of existing curricular materials; rather, they expect own-voice narratives to be selected according to quality, relevance, and educational value.

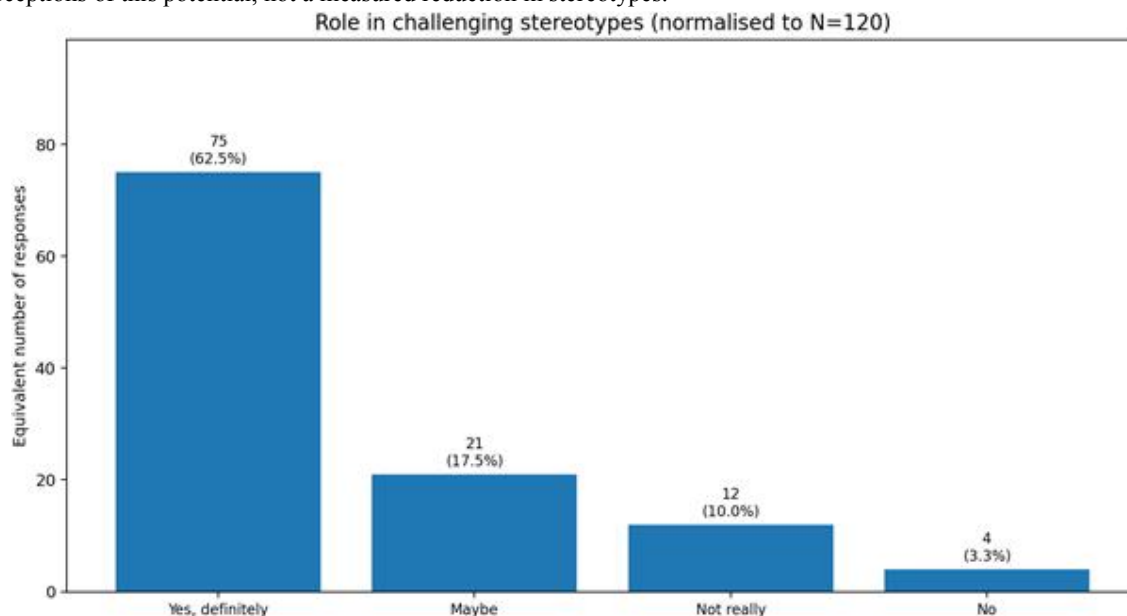


The graph on preferred types of own-voice narratives provides further insight. Personal stories of success and struggle constitute the largest category, with 54 responses (45.0%), closely followed by “All of the above,” with 50 responses (41.7%). Students therefore appear particularly receptive to narratives foregrounding lived experience, resilience, difficulty, and human agency. This suggests that literary diversity may be more effectively experienced through complex human stories than through identity categories presented in isolation.





The graph on challenging stereotypes presents one of the clearest patterns in the dataset. Seventy-five of the equivalent 120 responses (62.5%) state “Yes, definitely” that own-voice narratives help break stereotypes or misconceptions about people from different communities. A further 21 responses (17.5%) select “Maybe,” while 12 (10.0%) respond “Not really” and 4 (3.3%) select “No.” The strong positive orientation suggests that students recognise narrative as a mechanism through which dominant assumptions can be questioned. This positions literature not simply as an aesthetic object but as a site of encounter between different social experiences. However, the responses establish students’ perceptions of this potential, not a measured reduction in stereotypes.

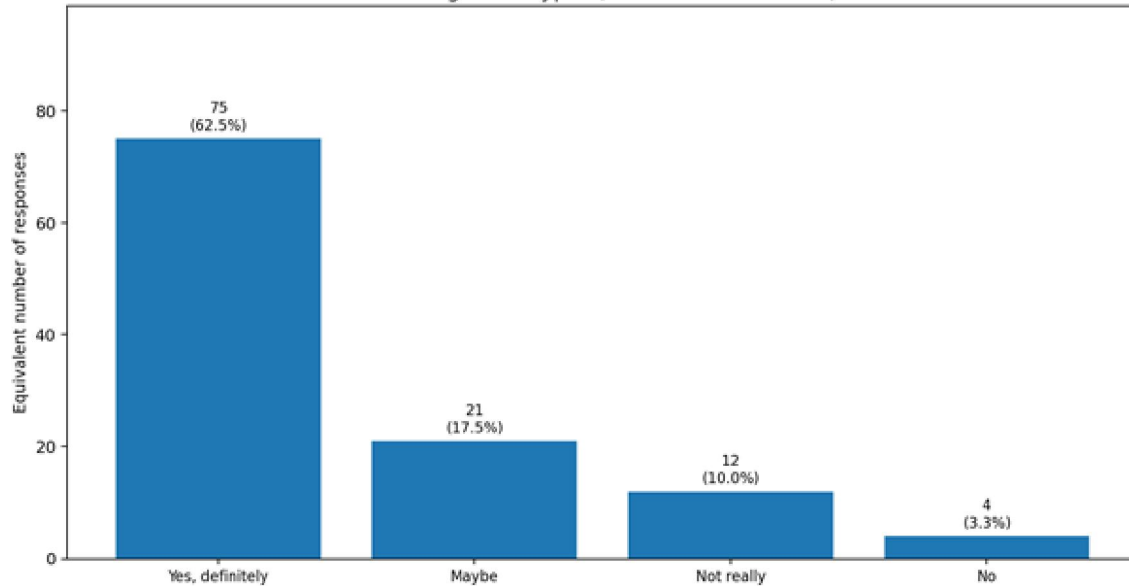


The graph on confidence in expressing personal experiences through writing reveals considerable readiness for personal engagement. Forty-six responses (38.3%) indicate that students are “Very confident,” while 41 (34.2%) are “Somewhat confident.” By contrast, 13 (10.8%) are “Not very confident” and 8 (6.7%) are “Not confident at all.” The concentration in the two confidence categories suggests that a substantial proportion of respondents are willing to position personal experience within classroom writing practices. This is relevant to own-voice reception because



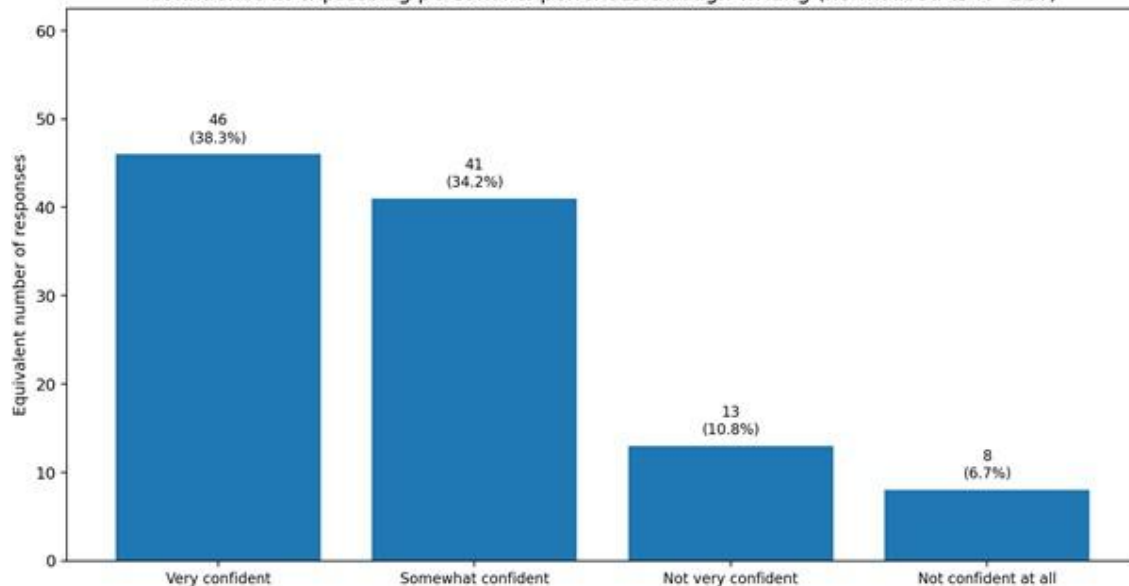
students who are prepared to articulate personal experiences may be receptive to literature that legitimises lived experience as a meaningful source of knowledge.

Breaking stereotypes (normalised to N=120)



Confidence in writing about personal experience cannot, however, be equated with identification with a particular prescribed text. The questionnaire does not directly ask students whether they see themselves reflected in specific curricular narratives. The graph should therefore be read as evidence of personal engagement and readiness rather than conclusive evidence of textual identification. Nevertheless, it reveals a pedagogical possibility: own-voice narratives can potentially create a bridge between literary study and students' own experiences.

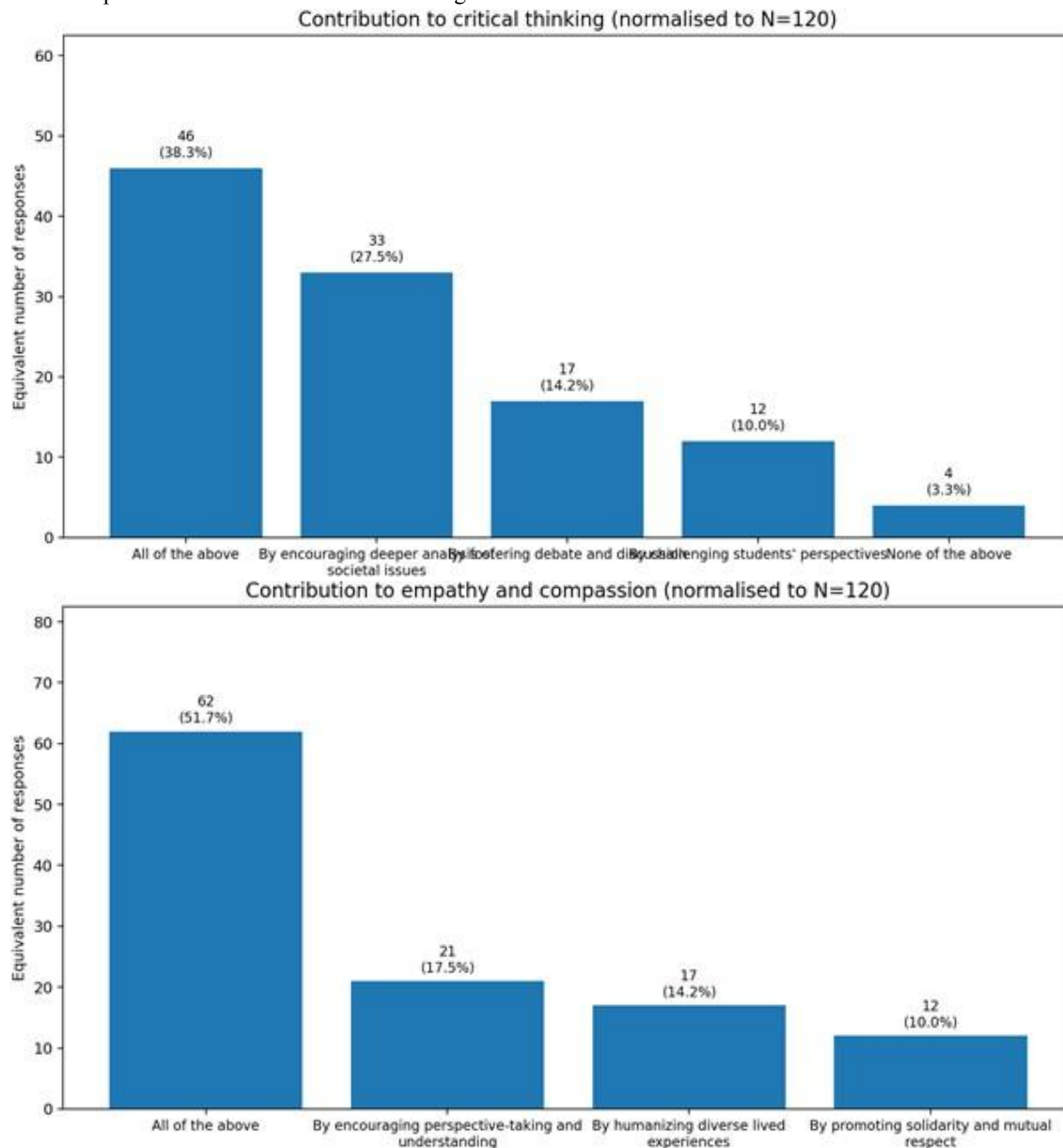
Confidence in expressing personal experiences through writing (normalised to N=120)



The empathy and compassion graph demonstrates a strong perception of the social value of own-voice narratives. The largest category, "All of the above," accounts for 62 responses (51.7%), while 21 (17.5%) identify perspective-taking



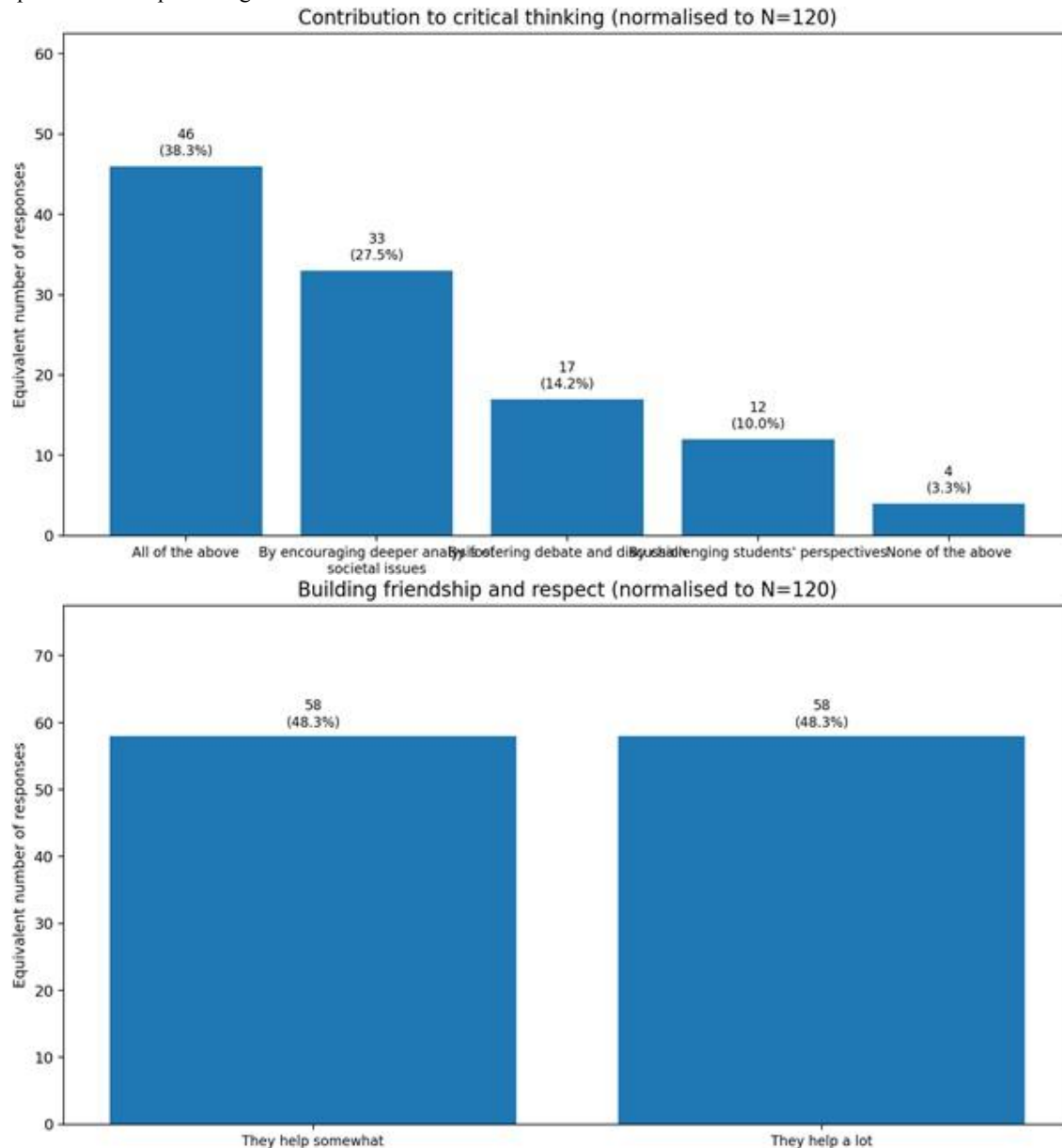
and understanding, 17 (14.2%) identify the humanisation of diverse lived experiences, and 12 (10.0%) identify solidarity and mutual respect. The distribution indicates that students perceive empathy as multidimensional. Own-voice narratives are understood not merely as stories that evoke sympathy but as texts that can encourage learners to enter unfamiliar perspectives, recognise the humanity of others, and develop mutual understanding. This suggests that narrative reception involves both emotional and cognitive dimensions.



The critical-thinking graph indicates that students perceive own-voice narratives as intellectually productive. Forty-six responses (38.3%) select “All of the above,” while 33 (27.5%) identify deeper analysis of societal issues, 17 (14.2%) identify debate and discussion, and 12 (10.0%) identify challenging students’ perspectives. Only 4 responses (3.3%) select “None of the above.” The pattern challenges the assumption that narratives of lived experience function primarily



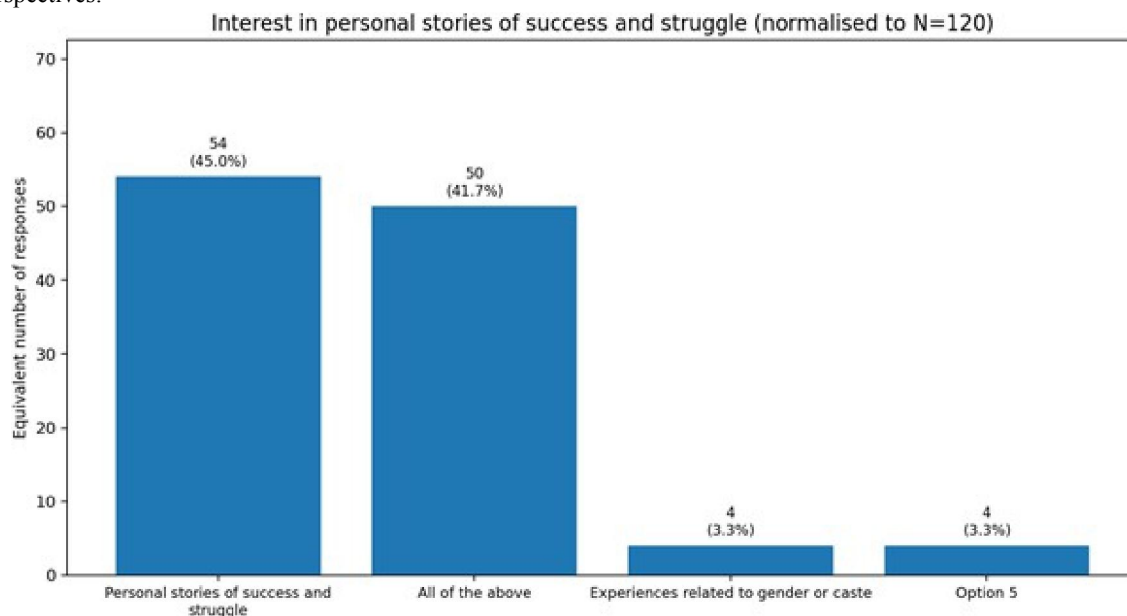
as affective or sentimental texts. Students associate them with analysis, debate, perspective revision, and engagement with social questions. Such responses support a conception of literary education in which aesthetic and social interpretation can operate together.



The graph on friendship and respect presents an almost evenly divided response: 58 of the equivalent 120 responses (48.3%) state that own-voice stories help “somewhat,” while another 58 (48.3%) state that they help “a lot.” This is useful because it introduces moderation into the otherwise strongly positive response pattern. Students recognise the interpersonal value of narratives, but nearly half perceive the effect as moderate rather than substantial. The result suggests that literary texts cannot be assumed to produce social transformation automatically. Their impact may

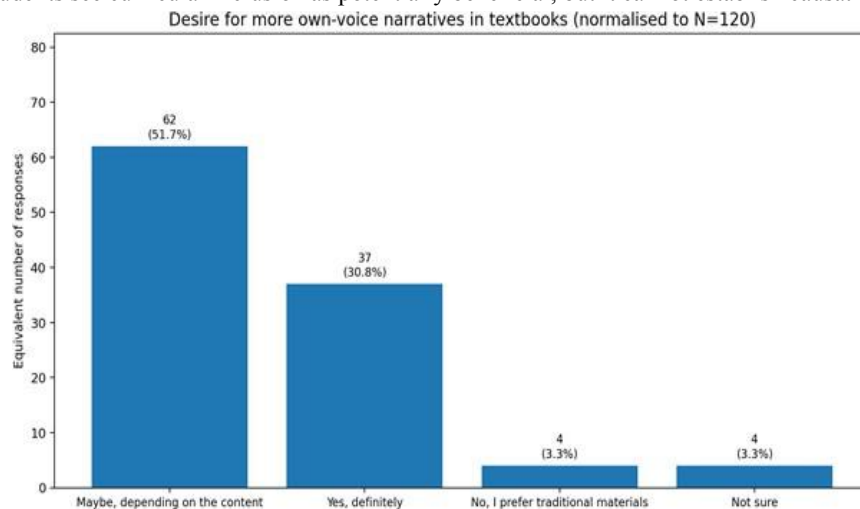


depend upon classroom dialogue, teacher mediation, reflective activities, and opportunities to negotiate different perspectives.



The perceived academic-impact graph shows the strongest positive response in the dataset: 83 of the equivalent 120 responses (69.2%) perceive a “Positive impact,” while 13 (10.8%) perceive no significant impact, 12 (10.0%) are unsure, and 4 (3.3%) perceive a negative impact. Students therefore do not regard own-voice narratives as peripheral to academic learning; instead, they associate them with educational value. This is significant for curriculum discussions because it challenges a possible opposition between literary diversity and academic learning.

Nevertheless, the finding represents perceived academic relevance rather than empirical evidence of improved academic performance. The questionnaire records students’ expectations and beliefs; it does not compare examination results or learning outcomes before and after exposure to own-voice narratives. The response therefore supports the argument that students see curricular inclusion as potentially beneficial, but it cannot establish causation.

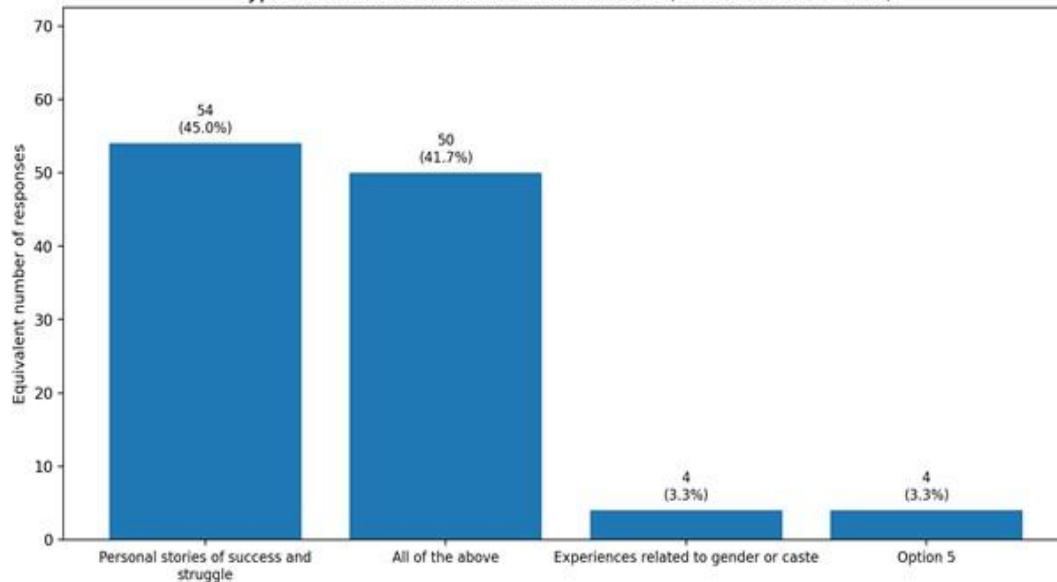


Taken together, the graphs reveal a movement from uneven conceptual awareness to strong pedagogical receptiveness. Students are not uniformly familiar with the terminology of own-voice narratives, yet they demonstrate considerable

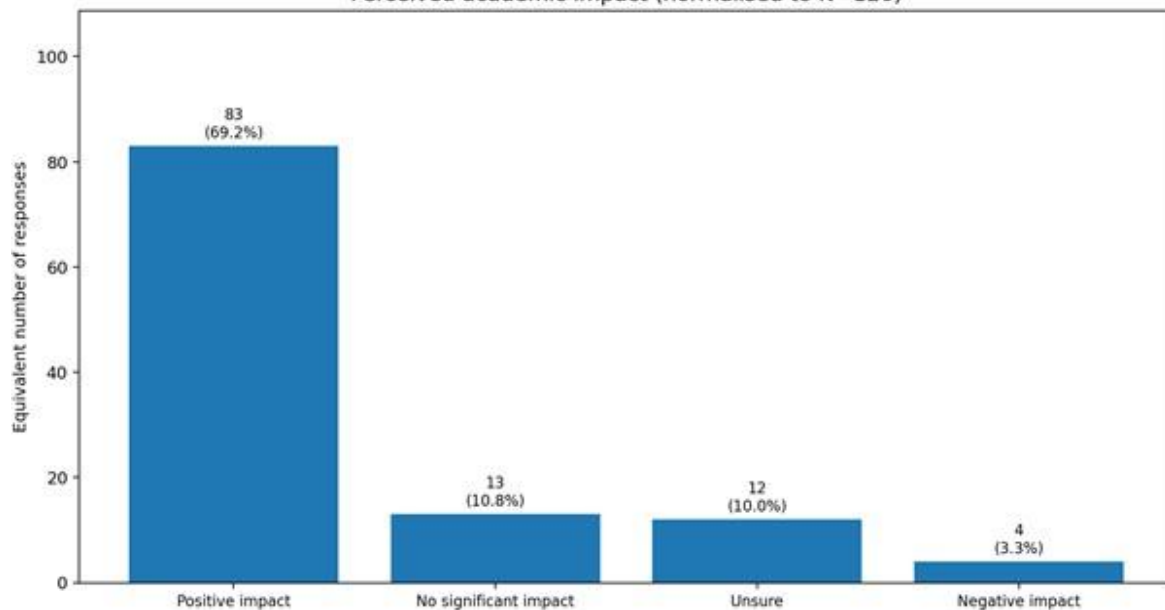


recognition of the value associated with lived-experience narratives. The strongest positive responses occur in areas connected with challenging stereotypes, perceived academic value, empathy, and willingness to engage with personal narratives. This suggests that reception may precede theoretical awareness: learners can value the functions of a literary practice even when they do not possess a fully developed conceptual vocabulary for describing it.

Types of narratives students want included (normalised to N=120)



Perceived academic impact (normalised to N=120)



The repeated prominence of conditional or moderate responses is equally important. The 51.7% response for “Maybe, depending on the content” indicates that students favour thoughtful inclusion rather than representation for its own sake. Similarly, the almost equal division between “They help somewhat” and “They help a lot” in relation to friendship and respect suggests that students recognise potential without assuming automatic transformation.



These findings point towards curricular reform grounded in meaningful selection, contextual relevance, authenticity, and pedagogical mediation.

VIII. CONCLUSION

The present study demonstrates that students' reception of own-voice narratives is broadly favourable, even though their conceptual familiarity with the term remains uneven. The response patterns reveal that students recognise the value of narratives grounded in lived experience and associate them with greater literary diversity, personal engagement, empathy, critical thinking, respect, and the questioning of stereotypes. The strong positive response to the potential of own-voice narratives to challenge stereotypes, together with the substantial perception of positive academic impact, indicates that students do not regard such narratives as peripheral to literary education. Rather, they perceive them as capable of connecting literary learning with social and personal experience.

At the same time, the findings reveal that students' support for curricular inclusion is not entirely unconditional. The prominence of the response "Maybe, depending on the content" suggests that students value meaningful and contextually appropriate selection rather than representation for its own sake. Their preference for personal stories of success and struggle further indicates an interest in narratives that foreground authentic human experiences and enable engagement with diverse realities. The almost equal responses regarding the role of own-voice narratives in building friendship and respect also suggest that students recognise their potential while not assuming that literary exposure alone can automatically produce social transformation. Effective teacher mediation, classroom discussion, reflection, and critical engagement remain important to translating representation into meaningful learning.

The study therefore highlights an important movement from representation to reception. The significance of own-voice narratives lies not merely in increasing the presence of marginalised writers or experiences within the curriculum, but in creating opportunities for learners to encounter perspectives that can challenge assumptions, broaden understanding, and connect literary study with lived realities. The findings suggest that a more inclusive English curriculum can provide a meaningful space for students to engage with questions of identity, diversity, social inequality, empathy, and belonging. Such inclusion, however, needs to be purposeful, authentic, pedagogically mediated, and responsive to students' contexts.

The study also acknowledges the exploratory nature of its findings. The original questionnaire consisted of 28 responses, and the presentation of the data as an equivalent N=120 represents proportional normalisation rather than an actual sample of 120 students. Furthermore, students' perceptions of the benefits of own-voice narratives cannot by themselves establish measurable changes in academic achievement, empathy, critical thinking, or stereotype reduction. Nevertheless, the response patterns provide valuable evidence of student receptiveness and indicate the need for further empirical research involving larger samples, qualitative interviews, text-specific responses, and intervention-based studies. Overall, the study argues that meaningful curricular reform should move beyond asking whose voices are represented to considering how those voices are received, interpreted, and valued by learners. Such a shift can contribute to the development of a more inclusive, pluralistic, learner-responsive, and socially conscious English curriculum in Kerala.

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